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Review

Reviewed Work(s): greased lightning by Hannah Weinstein, Michael Schultz, Kenneth Lawrence DuKore, Melvin Van Peebles and Leon Capatanos

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Source: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1977), p. 48

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41685814>

Accessed: 28-10-2016 00:50 UTC

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greased lightning

Produced by Hannah Weinstein; directed by Michael Schultz; screenplay by Kenneth Vose, Lawrence DuKore, Melvin Van Peebles and Leon Capatanos; cinematography by George Bouillet; edited by Bob Wyman and Randy Roberts; music by Fred Karlin. With Richard Pryor, Beau Bridges, Pam Grier, Cleavon Little, Vincent Gardenia, Richie Havens and Julian Bond. Color, 96 minutes. A Warner Bros. Release.



GREASED LIGHTNING may not be a great film, and it may not showcase the most engaging of Richard Pryor's many talents, but it was more interesting and more entertaining than much of the non-STAR WARS summer fare. Like other recent black films with a cross-over audience (LET'S DO IT AGAIN, CAR WASH, THE BINGO LONG TRAVELLING ALL-STARS AND MOTOR KINGS), it dares to spin dreams out of real social tensions and situations of the working poor.

Directed by Michael Schulz (CAR WASH, COOLEY HIGH) and produced through Third World Cinema, GREASED LIGHTNING tells the real-life story of Wendell Scott, the first black star of stock-car racing in the U.S. Glints of a good movie show through what is largely a mechanical effort. It's genuine, for instance, in lots of ways. The stock-car material carries Scott's stamp of approval—he was technical director. We even get real-life stock-car race footage, complete with the agonizing crashes and falls which, promising death, draw such huge crowds to the raceway. Schulz has worked to get a genuine feel to the parts of the film set in the 40's and 50's, to the point of reverent focus on parts, props and costumes which marked the period.

It's also genuine in a way rare to mass movies. To explain the development of Scott's life and career, the film refers to racial and class tensions. It's as shocking to the casual movie eye and ear as last-year-this-time BINGO LONG, when W.E.B. DuBois and the phrase "means of production" were referred to in a baseball story. In BINGO LONG, the parts made up a goofy whole. Here, however, references often remind us of what we're missing.

Wendell Scott pioneered black participation in stock-car racing and, as a pioneer, he caught all the brutality a racist southern society could offer. The film uses a series of confrontations to show us how difficult the struggle was, and how racism serves class interests. In the process, it's also rousing melodrama. The raceway owners pit white trash (Beau Bridges) against black meat (Richard

Pryor). After initial clashes and almost in spite of themselves, the two pal up together instead. When they get thrown out of a restaurant, it's as much for the white man's poverty as it is for the black man's skin. The well-dressed hate them both.

As a young man, Scott runs a taxi service. One day he chauffeurs a wealthy black man from the north, who not only shows contempt for his driver but gives him a lecture on the Protestant ethic, ignoring the sight of Scott vigorously pulling at his own bootstraps. After Scott becomes successful as a race driver, the sheriff (Vincent Gardenia), who once chased him through the woods as a bootlegger, suddenly wants to be photographed with Scott and family. No change of heart, it's just that the sheriff is running for mayor and needs the black vote. Later, the new mayor hustles sponsorship for Scott, because Scott has the power to put the town on the map.

Throughout, the movie depends on white stereotypes to describe the conflicts which formed Scott's career. Rules of thumb: they all look alike; they're turgid and dull; the exception—the odd good one—only proves the rule. These confrontations create good guys and bad guys, but do little more. They occasionally hint—in an exchange between Beau Bridges and his boss, for instance—that corporate interests use racism to divide the poor. They don't, and can't, explain the patterns they describe. The caricatures of white folk do, however, give a powerful sense of how it feels to be black and poor and powerless. Audiences love it.

Does this amount to a 'get-whitey' approach? Schulz has been criticized for just that, but that criticism makes as much sense as his charge that ROCKY is racist. Both films would more justly be accused of banal and individualistic moralism. Both describe working class victories within an unequal system where the victor has been pegged as a loser. Both of them cannily refer to the real social tensions which have created that loser

image (GREASED LIGHTNING far more frankly than ROCKY). But neither of them makes more than a pass at analyzing the nature of success.

For both movies, it's the women of the unlikely heroes who raise the issue, from a humanitarian viewpoint. Rocky gets beat up, Scott drives against death every time. Both of them sell their talents to thrillseekers. The reasons why they're 'losers' and why people line up for morbid thrills are linked. But neither film can afford to throw away the real personal victory of its hero to critique his style of success. Business is business.

GREASED LIGHTNING works earnestly to make a much simpler point still: that black people are people too, with family feeling and hopes for a stable and honest life. Sometimes, it just doesn't work. The film insists too much, becomes sappy, and ends up patronizing its subjects. Contrasting with those ragged public confrontations between powerful and powerless, for instance, are the home-life scenes (Pam Grier plays Scott's wife) which suffer from a sentimentalism Schulz already has a reputation for. They remind you, too, of the earnest and humorless concern for proper family relations which Muhammad Ali imposed on THE GREATEST. Schulz should remember that puritanism and prurience go together.

Interesting as GREASED LIGHTNING is, the idea was clearly better than the execution. Four people, including Melvin van Peebles (SWEET SWEETBACK...) worked on the screenplay. It's too bad Richard Pryor didn't add his name to the list (he was one of the authors of BLAZING SADDLES). Pryor is able to express anger, and the experience of racism, as well as the frustration at people's ability to contribute to their own misery, so that we can hear it. The screenwriters here have instead loaded the script with some unworkable lines, and a few impossible scenes.

Other technical faults then glare, because of the clumsy structure. The pacing in particular is atrocious. We regularly lack clues to move along, and also suffer from unnecessarily long pauses in the beginning and ending of shots. Several acting bloopers suggest that retakes were in short supply, and some of the wooden acting also seems a consequence of haste and budget restrictions.

Richard Pryor has manifest difficulty in playing a straightforward, non-comedy role. In spite of its advertising, GREASED LIGHTNING has only occasional moments of comedy. Pryor's nervous humor has to leak out in this film, often by accident. His character, like Pam Grier's, is too good to be interesting.

What finally holds your interest in a mediocre movie like this is that it's about real social relations, real tensions, real lives. It can be wrong, but it's not silly, and it's often fun. GREASED LIGHTNING is one example of a way to make mass movies without insulting your audience.

Pat Aufderheide